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Doing Away With 'Double-Dipping'

In their April 19 column, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak warn that underfunded civil-service pensions are a fiscal "time bomb" and one of the principal causes of inflation.

I agree with that observation, and I was glad to see a column devoted to it. I was sorry, however, that Evans and Novak made only scant reference to what I consider an even bigger fiscal time bomb, which continues to tick right under our noses. I refer to the even more scandalously underfunded military retirement system.

The columnists point out that the present unfunded liability of the civil-service retirement system is about \$116 billion. The military retirement liability far exceeds that. Currently, it is about \$170 billion, and with only half as many potential annuitants as civil service. This year alone, Uncle Sam will pay out more than \$10 billion in military pensions, and if the system continues unchanged, that annual outlay will jump to about \$30 billion by the turn of the century. Most of this goes to non-disability retirees who began drawing their pensions after only 21

or 22 years of service (during which time they contributed not one nickel toward their own retirement).

Many of these "pensioners" are not even retired; rather, they are holding down full-time jobs and collecting military pensions to boot (the Department of Defense alone has more than 75,000 such "double-dippers" on its civilian payroll).

There is no question that we urgently need to reform the military pension system, not only to end waste, but also to ensure that today's soldiers and sailors will be able to collect reasonable pension benefits when their time comes.

A presidential commission headed by Charles Zwick recently recommended steps to end the "20 years and out" syndrome, and to prevent military retirees from collecting benefits before age 55. In my view, these are reasonable steps. Unless we take such action, I fear the day may come when the traditional budgetary choice is not one of "guns or butter," but rather of "guns or pensions."

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